

# Evaluation Report Brief

## The Annie E. Casey Foundation: Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP™) Initiative

### What is the community challenge?

Young people who have been involved in the child welfare and justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness are likely to be among the 4.6 million “opportunity youth”. These are young people aged 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor employed. They are also likely to face added challenges that stem directly from these experiences, including disrupted schooling, housing instability, limited family support, and trauma.

### What is the promising solution?

LEAP seeks to reduce the inequalities in life chances and outcomes that affect young people who are systems-involved or experiencing homelessness through the Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) and JFF’s Back on Track programs. The JAG program aims to help young people obtain their secondary degree and equip them with work and life skills to transition into quality jobs. Back on Track aims to help young adults’ transition to postsecondary education and put them on a path toward obtaining a postsecondary credential.

### What was the purpose of evaluation?

The evaluation of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s LEAP initiative by MDRC began in 2016 and finished reporting in 2019. The LEAP evaluation is primarily an implementation study, seeking to understand how the 10 LEAP grantees launched their programs within local collaboratives and adapted the two program models to advance opportunity for those who enrolled. To answer these questions, the implementation study used site visits, in-person interviews, phone interviews, and descriptive analyses of program data. The evaluation also included an outcomes and cost study. The outcomes study sought to explore participant engagement and outcomes using program participant data. The cost study’s objective was to understand the resources needed to replicate the LEAP programs. The cost study analyzed program financial data.

### What did the evaluation find?

As a grantee of SIF, the Annie E. Casey Foundation engaged an independent evaluator to evaluate the LEAP Initiative. The implementation study covered the first 30 months of the SIF period (Years 1, 2, and midway through Year 3). The outcome study was restricted to participants who enrolled in the first 18 months of the SIF period (Year 1 to midway through Year 2). The evaluation had the following findings:

- LEAP grantees adapted JAG and Back on Track services to focus on addressing the circumstances in the young people’s lives that constrained their potential. This included adapting how they planned to deliver core model activities to promote engagement.
- Back on Track participants, most of which had a high school diploma and previous work experience, had high engagement in services and high levels of enrollment into postsecondary education.
- Most JAG participants who enrolled received the program’s key services (mostly youth that did not have a high school diploma or previous work experience), but more than half did not fully complete the program. Among those who completed the program’s core services phase, most were employed or in school at one point during the first six months of the follow-up period.

### Program At-a-Glance

CNCS Program: Social Innovation Fund

Intervention: Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP™)

Grantee: Annie E. Casey

Focus Area: Youth Development

Focus Populations: Youth aged 15 to 25 who have been involved in the child welfare and justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness

Communities Served: Alaska, Arizona, California, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New York.

- Per participant costs, including outreach and follow up, ranged from \$5,300 to \$7,300.

## Notes on the evaluation

The grantee intended to conduct a quasi-experimental evaluation design using propensity score matching. The impact evaluation design was intended to be implemented at multiple sites. However, a shorter-than-anticipated public-private funding partnership due to the loss of SIF Congressional appropriations prevented this impact evaluation from being conducted. The original proposed evaluation plan assumed a five-year budgeted study design. The loss of appropriations limited the study to three years and excluded the impact evaluation. While the evaluation did not conduct an impact study, the evaluation did provide several promising outcome findings. These included: (1) Sixty-eight percent of Back on Track participants enrolled in postsecondary education; (2) Among JAG participants who completed the active phase and were employed prior to JAG, wages increased by 29 percent; (3) Forty percent of JAG participants who completed the active phase earned high school equivalency credentials and twenty-one percent obtained an industry-recognized credential. It is important to note that these are observations of participants outcomes and do not imply causality.

### How is LEAP using the evaluation findings to improve?

The report notes LEAP programs made significant strides in launching and building out their partnerships and adapting how they delivered JAG and Back on Track services to LEAP’s priority populations in response to what they were learning about the support needed to help participants persist on their educational and career pathways. These lessons will be carried forward into the next multi-year phase of the LEAP work, starting in Summer 2019. During this next phase, all LEAP grantees will continue to work with participants who are currently enrolled to support their completion of LEAP, participating in LEAP technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning community activities. A subset of the original LEAP grantees will also expand their work to deepen relationships with system-partners to replicate and scale services to reach more systems-involved and homeless young people who could benefit from LEAP, and to promote change in public system practices and policies.

The evaluation also noted several lessons learned from the implementation of the LEAP initiative:

- Programs serving this priority population should incorporate comprehensive strategies to address barriers to accessing educational and work-related opportunities, such as housing, transportation, child care and financial needs.
- Develop creative recruitment pathways through partnerships and data-sharing agreements to reach young people who may be able to benefit from services.
- Collaborate with multiple agencies and other organizations align resources, opening access to services, and develop and promote practice and policy level changes.
- Strong staff-participant relationships are key. Finding and retaining the right staff that connect to young people is central to participant engagement.
- For program developers and implementing agencies, allowing flexibility in how program models are delivered (e.g., individually-based and cohort-based classes, online options in rural environments, etc.) can promote participant engagement and success.

### Evaluation At-a-Glance

**Evaluation Design:**  
Implementation, outcome and cost study

**Study Population:** Young people aged 15 to 25 who have been involved in the child welfare and justice systems, or who are experiencing homelessness

**Independent Evaluator:**  
MDRC

**This Evaluation’s Level of Evidence\*:** Preliminary

\*SIF and AmeriCorps currently use different definitions of levels of evidence.

The content of this brief was drawn from the full evaluation report submitted to CNCS by the grantee/subgrantee. The section of the brief that discusses evaluation use includes contribution of the grantee/subgrantee. All original content from the report is attributable to its authors.

To access the full evaluation report and learn more about CNCS, please visit <http://www.nationalservice.gov/research>.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have compelling evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the U.S. The SIF invests in three priority areas: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.